



“Your Arm’s Too Short to Box With God”¹

—Or is it?

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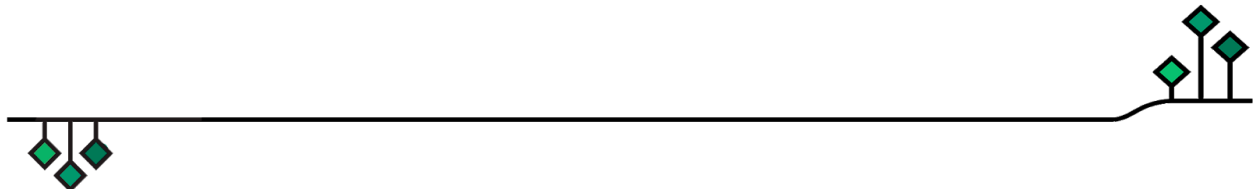
Parashat VaYera 5781

I.

Over decades of interfaith dialogue, one presentation of Jewish religion always evoked a startled response: when I told how humans would argue with God by the rules of the covenant, as shown by Abraham’s behavior in this *parashah*. To many Christian dialogue participants, this seemed disrespectful, oblivious of the degree of difference between God’s majesty and human insignificance.

True, there are Jewish texts that stress human unworthiness and insignificance in the presence of God. In both the daily morning service and High Holy Day liturgy, for example, we say, “What can we say in Your Presence, Lord Our God... all the heroes are as nothing before you... The wise as if they were without knowledge... most of their doings are worthless... all

¹ This was the title of a musical/celebration, rooted in African American and gospel music, which tells the story of the Gospel of Matthew. I never saw the production as I am not a fan of the Book of Matthew (although written by a Jew, the book contains some of the most damaging anti-Semitic texts often invoked in the course of persecuting Jews). Nevertheless, from the moment I saw the title “Your Arm’s Too Short to Box with God,” it captured for me one of the major divergences between Jewish and Christian assumptions that the magnitude of God reduces humans’ standing. The sense of human dignity, intimacy, and even equality in the relationship with God inside the covenant is established in this *parashah*.



is vanity.”² Nevertheless, relative parity and free interchange is one of the fundamental implications of covenant.

Here is Soloveitchik’s (admittedly modern) reading. “He [God] joins man and shares in his covenantal existence... The element of togetherness of God and man is indispensable for the covenantal community... the very validity of the covenant rests upon *free negotiation, mutual assumption of duties and full recognition of the equal rights of both parties...*”³ Soloveitchik adds that what flows from this is “the paradoxical experience of *freedom, reciprocity and “equality” in one’s personal confrontation with God...*”⁴

Out of this consciousness has grown the established Jewish tradition of arguing with God, and its close variant, confronting and even criticizing God’s behavior. Abraham initiates this practice in our *parashah*, but it is carried on by Moses, Jeremiah, and others in the Bible. The tradition continues in the Talmud, the medieval chronicles and laments, and down to Elie Wiesel’s life long controversy with God over the Shoah.⁵

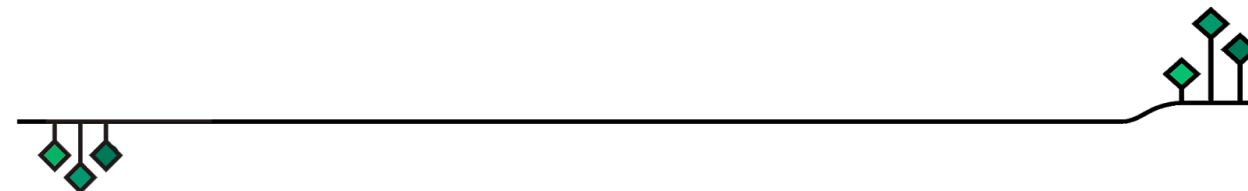
Mind the paradox. Judaism taught the world that there is one cosmic God, beyond human grasp or control. Maimonides warned that as God is infinite and humans are finite, then anything we say about God is likely to be a distortion, based on the infinitesimal insight we are capable of into the real nature of the incommensurable God.

² Translation: *Koren Daily Prayer Book*, pp. 36-37.

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday: 1991), p. 44, emphasis supplied.

⁴ *The Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 44. Note that Soloveitchik is a bit nervous at the parity between God and human in the covenant (which he has established) so he puts quotation marks around the word “equality.”

⁵ See, among others: Moses (Exodus 32:11-14, 31-32); Jeremiah (Jeremiah ch. 12:1ff, Lamentations ch. 3); Talmud: “*Mi kamokha ba-ilmim* (instead of *ba-elim*), “Who is like You, among the *Silent* (instead of the *Mighty*)” (Babylonian Talmud Gittin 56b); down to Elie Wiesel’s lifelong controversy with God over the Shoah, expressed in *Night, The Gates of the Forest, The Trial of God*, and too many other source to cite. On this whole tradition, see Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition*, and Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Tradition*.



Still, the tradition insisted that the infinite God, beyond our ken or capacity to understand, who sustains the vast universe, nevertheless cares about humans. Driven by love, God seeks our relationship and our partnership in repairing Creation. Although revelation is unlimited, it is cut to the measure of human capacity to understand. In joining humans in covenant, God further self-limits to be available, reachable, and relatable. In that relation of togetherness, rank and power fall away. In the moment, the two partners speak heart to heart.

God communicates that the human, standing in the Divine Presence, is an image of God: infinitely valuable, equal to all others, and unique. God wants humans to act accordingly. This, not simple obedience or acceptance, is what God seeks from us. Therefore the human partner feels empowered not to acquiesce, not to speak politically correctly, not to simply go along. Abraham speaks truth—and, in this case, justice—to power because he was invited to do so (Genesis 18:17). Although Abraham repeatedly says that he is not worthy of arguing with God, in fact, he carries on a negotiation. He repeatedly argues as the full partner that he knows himself to be.

Similarly, when God tells Moses of God's intention to punish Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf, God says: "Now, *let me be*, so that my anger will flare at them. I will consume them and I will make you a great nation [in their place]" (Exodus 32:10). Rabbinic commentators point out that the words "let me be" are an invitation to speak up.⁶ When Moses speaks out of covenantal concern for others, out of freedom and commitment to the covenantal goals, he, the human, becomes a true partner in the decision. The people of Israel is spared.

Abraham's and Moses' arms turn out not to be too short to box with God. Human freedom, dignity, and equality reign supreme. I see this as the Torah's authorization for us, God's covenantal partners, in our day, to bring many religious practices up to their full stature of

⁶ See Shemot Rabbah 42:9 and Rashi on Exodus 32:10.



love, dignity, equality for all—as in improving the standing and treatment of women, people who are handicapped, gay, and gentiles.

If only the *parashah* ended right here...

II.

Parashat VaYera now turns and puts before us the most drastic contradiction to all that I wrote above. God, the Lord who chose Abraham because of his (and God's) commitment to justice and righteousness, commands Abraham to sacrifice his innocent, first born son of Sarah on a high mountain.

Talk about splitting religion from ethics! This instruction not only goes against the values taught in the covenant, it erases God's covenantal pledge to Abraham. And our hero Abraham—who three chapters earlier stood up and spoke up to God, who negotiated as a free and equal partner to get the Sodom policy changed—submits. He says nothing. Talk about unreasoning obedience. For three days Abraham and Isaac go together to the fatal destination, without a murmur. Talk about human value. The most devastating humiliation, robbing the parent of a shred of dignity, is to kill one's own most precious child to be "worthy" of God's acceptance.

After decades of struggling with the contradiction, here is the closest approximation I have come up with to reconcile the two parts of the *parashah*.⁷ The Akeidah story is a *rejection of child sacrifice*. At the last minute, Abraham is told "Do not lay a hand on the child" (Genesis 22:12). But in the biblical context, child sacrifice was widely looked up to. Maimonides later

⁷ All the other optional explanations are too many and diverse to comment here. I do want to acknowledge David Hartman's analysis that the Torah's position is dialectical. He explores the tension of "assertion versus submission" in his book, *The Living Covenant* (Free Press: 1985), ch. 2.



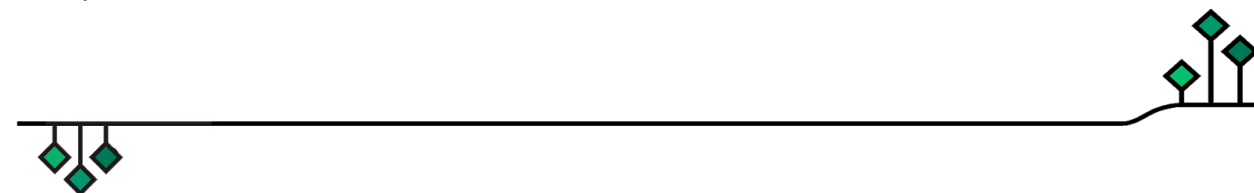
wrote about sacrifices that they were so ubiquitous and entrenched that people could not conceive of serious God worship that did not incorporate sacrifices (Guide of the Perplexed 3:32). In Abraham's time, child sacrifice was identified by many as an act of supreme religious devotion. (I have sometimes wondered if that consensus did not shape—or misdirect—Abraham's sense that God instructed him to literally sacrifice his son).⁸

If the divine intention was to keep Judaism absolutely clear of this practice, how could this be accomplished when almost everybody believed in its efficacy? For maximum impact, the best way to demolish the credibility of the practice would be to instruct Abraham, the avatar of the new monotheistic covenant, to undertake this ritual, and for three days, to go through every step identical with the widespread practice. Then at the moment of climax, when everybody is watching and caught up in the familiar scenario, to say: "No! Do not do anything to the child!"

This reversal climax would generate the maximum cognitive dissonance to the validity of child sacrifice. It could never be denied that at the moment of truth, when the whole world agreed this was the highest form of divine worship, the voice from Heaven proclaimed: absolutely not. So the Akeidah is not about total submission, but about total rejection of the regnant model of sacrificing everything—including morality and deepest human feeling—at God's demand.⁹

⁸ See Bereishit Rabbah 56:8 where the *midrash* speculates that Abraham misinterpreted God's instruction. See also Rashi s.v. והעלהו on Genesis 22:2.

⁹ The truth is this teaching was not learned. The book of II Kings tells how King Mesha of Moab, embattled and about to lose his final redoubt to the armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom, sacrificed his son, the crown prince, to Chemosh god of Moab. This unleashed a "fury" and the invading armies were driven off. Jeremiah also tells that Israelites sacrificed their sons to Baal, believing that they were serving the God of Israel at the highest level. God's horrified response, was that, as far as child sacrifice goes, "I did not command this; nor did it ever come into my heart" (Jeremiah 7:31).



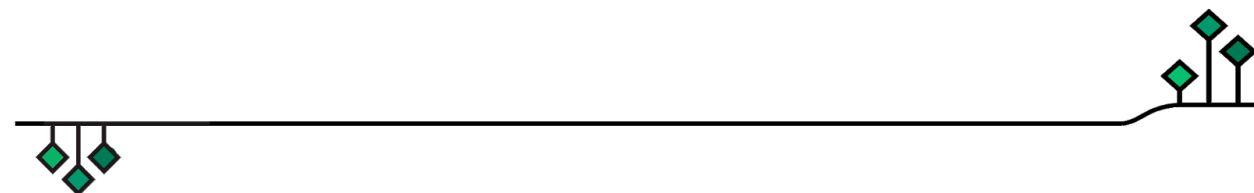
III.

So why doesn't this interpretation satisfy my theological yearning for a God who asks for loving, free commitment, not self-denying obedience or crushing submission? The answer is: I keep wrestling with Abraham's behavior on the three day journey. The plain story seems to me to be that he was prepared to sacrifice his one and only beloved son. With Abraham in my mind, I shudder every time we blow *shofar* on Rosh HaShanah and ask God to have mercy and forgive us "just as a father feels mercy for his children." How could Abraham, feeling love for Isaac, keep on walking to Moriah?

My conclusion: If we can never accept an instruction from God that breaks our ethical conscience, that crushes our heart, then our reason and our heart is the ultimate authority. Then *it* is God: then we are God, the final arbiter of right and wrong. It is this finality, this ultimate quality, that I think is wrong. God wants us to exercise our freedom/reason/conscience in matters of Torah. Over ninety-nine percent of the time, we must follow our reason, and if called for, challenge God or the reigning understanding of Torah out of our commitment to God and conscience. We must use our best judgement and work out an interpretation of divine instruction that reconciles it with human dignity and value ethics and that challenges it when it is "off" morally. But once in a lifetime? in a millennium? in an eternity?—we will recognize the uncontrollable word of God, that shatters our ethic or breaks our heart—yet it is the right thing to do.

One can only encounter such a moment, as Abraham did, in direct connection with God, not some inherited tradition or authoritative text. *Abraham knew that moment*—although the instructions contradicted everything he stood for and felt.

The Akeidah teaches us that we, too, must be capable of the exceptional moment when all rational and ethical guidelines fall away. God help us, for it would be so easy, so likely, to be a



moment of misjudgement, one that could well lead us to a breach of all that we know of God and of what God wants of us.

I remain committed to uphold conscience and to argue with God. But I acknowledge that there is a level so rarified that there, all my structures of thought fall away and my values of life are inadequate. Every year on the Shabbat of VaYera and on Rosh HaShanah, when we read the Akeidah, I pray with great intensity: May such a singular moment never come into my life. I don't think that I would be up to it.

